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Colorado's paid leave program just launched. Here's why that's good for the state.

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Today marks the 31st anniversary of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), landmark federal legislation that provides eligible workers unpaid, job-protected leave for specific family and medical reasons. The FMLA has helped millions of workers like Kris Garcia from Denver, who explained: "When my mom was originally diagnosed with cancer, I used intermittent FMLA leave to take her to radiation appointments and oncology visits. Later, I used FMLA leave for meetings with the hospice team that helped me with her end-of-life care. Being by her side made a world of difference for both of us."

But the FMLA is not enough. The lack of a paid leave standard means that many people cannot afford to take time away from work, even when they need it. That's why we're celebrating Colorado's new paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program (FAMLI), which began accepting applications on Jan. 1.

FAMLI will allow Coloradans to access paid time off from work when they need to recover from a serious health condition, care for a family member, bond with a new child, take safe leave or take leave related to a family member's military deployment. Coloradans voted by ballot measure to pass the law that created FAMLI in 2020. But even before then, the city of Denver had studied the possibility of implementing paid family and medical leave, one of several cities and states to receive funding from the Women's Bureau to do so.

Learn about the findings and impacts of the Women's Bureau's 2014-2016 Paid Leave Analysis Grants.

Beyond benefiting workers and their families, paid leave benefits businesses as well. Evidence from successful programs in other states shows that Colorado employers could see a positive impact from FAMLI. Studies have shown that paid leave is linked to lower turnover costs for businesses through greater retention of employees, as well as higher productivity and morale.

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Further, state paid leave programs can help some small employers – who might not be able to afford to provide paid leave on their own – match the benefits of larger employers, increasing their competitiveness. Support for paid leave among small businesses increased during COVID.

Colorado Springs employer Tracy duCharme knew that FAMLI would be helpful to her small business. Before the program was implemented, Tracy said, "I am competing for employees with larger organizations, and I often lose out on top talent because I can't offer [benefits like paid leave…]. A[n insurance] pool of 6 individuals is not the same as a pool

Does your state have paid leave laws? Click here for an interactive version of this map.

of millions. […] I am eagerly awaiting the launch of the paid family and medical leave insurance program so I will finally be able to provide my employees with this critical benefit in a way that is sustainable and predictable for my business."

Business owners like Tracy believe that employers benefit when workers can take the time they need and then return to work. In fact, if the U.S. took family-supporting policies like paid leave nationwide, Women's Bureau research suggests it could add $775 billion to the economy every year. With Colorado's FAMLI program now in effect, and four more states implementing programs in the next couple of years, momentum for paid leave is expected to continue to grow.

Learn more about paid family and medical leave and view our map of state paid leave laws.

Gayle Goldin is the deputy director of the Women's Bureau.

Tags: Women's Bureau, working families, Paid Leave, paid family and medical leave, family leave, parental leave

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